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SUBJECT: REINFORCING THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE ON AFGHANISTAN

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[1](#)B. PARIS 1588

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Rivkin for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary. Embassy Paris has been actively engaged with French leaders in the MFA, MOD, and the President's office in the lead-up to and after the roll out of President Obama's message on Afghanistan last week. In the lead-up to the President's West Point speech, Ambassador Rivkin spoke repeatedly with both FM Kouchner and NSA-equivalent Jean-David Levitte. In addition, a visit by CJCS Admiral Mullen gave us an opportunity for a high-level push with the French Chief of Defense Forces for increased French military contributions in Afghanistan. Each of these French leaders expressed support for the U.S. and promised further public support after President Obama's announcement. They also took on board our specific requests for additional French military and civilian contributions, but each of them noted that it is President Sarkozy, and Sarkozy alone, who will make any final decisions. On the day of the speech, President Sarkozy released a solid public statement praising the U.S. strategy as "courageous, determined and clear-sighted," and he called on the international community to support it. A presidential-level phone call before the speech yielded some movement in the French position, but we believe that additional French support is unlikely to be forthcoming until at least after the January London conference on Afghanistan, and possibly after the March 21 regional elections have taken place in France. End summary.

PREPARING THE GROUND

[1](#)2. (C/NF) French NSA-equivalent Jean-David Levitte told the Ambassador on November 25 that France "understood our messages" on Afghanistan and offered full support for the McChrystal Report. Nevertheless, he underscored that President Sarkozy has effectively managed public opinion on Afghanistan by promising not to surpass current troop levels and can't simply change his mind "just because the U.S. says so." Levitte said that Sarkozy would need to have a national debate on increasing French contributions to Afghanistan and that this debate would be more successful if led by Sarkozy and based on new developments in Afghanistan -- perhaps triggered by a President Karzai presentation at the January 28 conference in London. Levitte expressed the hope that when President Obama announces the U.S. decision on Afghanistan that he acknowledges the long period of reflection needed to reach this decision, that he thank Allies and partners for their contribution and indicate understanding if others also need to take some time to reflect on the issues "so they will join us in time." In a separate conversation, FM Kouchner

made similar comments to the Ambassador about public opinion in France while noting that the French must make a "visible effort" to help the United States. In his conversation with CJCS Mullen on November 25, French CHOD Georgelin stated that the French have additional military capabilities available for Afghanistan while underscoring the decision to enhance French contributions remains a political decision for President Sarkozy and would be favorably influenced by direct intervention from President Obama (reftel B). Similarly, Patrick Maisonnave, Strategic Affairs Director at the MFA, and Francois Richier, Strategic Affairs Advisor to President Sarkozy, when pressed hard to think about the importance of France being among the active supporters, conceded that they had not looked at it from a Washington optic (France as a country with excess capacity taking no public steps to augment assistance) and agreed to refer it to more senior levels. Like Levitte and Kouchner, they too deferred to Sarkozy as the sole decider.

NECESSARY FOLLOW-UP

¶3. (C/NF) Following receipt of reftel A urging Ambassadorial-level support following President Obama's announcement, the Ambassador spoke again with Jean-David Levitte on December 3 to express appreciation for President Sarkozy's supportive statement on Afghanistan and to urge France to move as quickly as possible to follow up on the ideas President Sarkozy put on the table during their November 30 conversation (which include possible additional

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financial assistance and gendarmes as police trainers, as well as further consideration of more troops later). Levitte cautioned that there will be absolutely no public announcement of additional assistance before the January London conference. The Ambassador urged that we keep our dialogue open in the meantime to try to push the process along. Ambassador Rivkin also released a press statement in support of our strategy and approved an op-ed on Afghanistan which will be published in the December 9 Le Monde international daily newspaper.

¶4. (C/NF) In another follow-on meeting, Pol M/C spoke extensively with Francois Richier, Strategic Affairs Advisor to President Sarkozy. Richier said that Sarkozy had personally approved his December 2 statement in support of the Obama strategy. He cautioned that additional financial, civilian or military support would "take time" -- perhaps weeks -- to be confirmed. As it was President Sarkozy himself who announced in October that "not one more soldier" would be deployed to Afghanistan, it will take time and a public debate to re-frame the issue and change the public's mind. When pressed, Richier admitted that the March regional elections would not be won (or lost) on the question of Afghanistan, but stated that the Afghanistan strategy is "part of the total package" on voters' minds. He said that the first step will be the December 16 debate on Afghanistan in the National Assembly; the crucial element is to keep the President's majority UMP party from splitting on the issue. French CHOD Georgelin and DefMin Morin will then visit French troops in RC-East over Christmas and New Year's to help create a positive dynamic. Richier stated that the January conference in London would be key to the overall effort, with France pushing for a unified statement of support at this week's EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting.

¶5. (C/NF) Richier cautioned that the worst thing now for French leaders is to have a discussion based simply on the number of troops deployed. The President's office wants to shift the debate to focus on the question of "what is our mission and how do we achieve it?" In the meantime, they are "very discreetly" looking at possible options and interested in what Germany may do to reinforce their

contributions. When pressed that earlier contributions of financial assistance or trainers would not be so controversial, Richier stated flatly that France has no money to give. Further, he admitted that Paris is unwilling to donate to the ANA or LOFTA trust funds as French leaders do not agree that building a national army or police force is the solution (rather, they have vague ideas about seeing these functions broken down along ethnic or regional lines). They further worry about money going to high-cost consultants and rampant corruption. Therefore, France is channeling its own limited budgetary assistance to projects in RC-East where they have more oversight and can choose projects they deem important to their efforts in the area.

COMMENT

¶6. (C/NF) Comment. The Obama-Sarkozy phone call provided an opening for political movement on additional contributions to Afghanistan, but it will still involve a substantial effort to confirm additional French financial, civilian, or military assistance. It was Sarkozy who painted himself into a corner with his comment about "not one more soldier" to Afghanistan, and post agrees that it may take some time and preparation to walk back from that statement on military assistance. However, financial and training assistance are clearly less controversial and the only thing that seems to be blocking them is bureaucratic intransigence and a political unwillingness to make some hard decisions on where France should spend its money in this time of budget constraints. Post will continue to follow up with our French interlocutors and appreciates the recent high-level Washington support to reinforce this message. End Comment.
RIVKIN